

# Gear Up For Giant 'Skies

By Spencer Berman, Contributing Writer

Admit it — as you're reading this article, you're already anticipating next musky season. Most of us try to take the edge off, so to speak, by sharpening a few hundred hooks, and straighten up and wax the boat. As you're doing this you're looking for ways to increase your chances for a monster musky in the new season.

Lucky for you, I've got two great ways to catch a giant. Here's how.

## Trolling Bucktails

Trolling big bucktails has really made a splash in the musky world. There are a few areas where this is a common practice but in most locales it is seldom used. It can, however, pay huge dividends for the people willing to try it. Trolling bucktails is not as simple as you might think and requires a very specific trolling set-up to ensure maximum results.

First of all is the bucktail itself, because there are a lot of major issues with trying to troll a standard Cowgirl, which was designed for casting. The blades used on a Cowgirl are very thin to create maximum pull and water displacement. They cannot, however, stand up to the constant torque of being trolled and they to break where they connect to the cle-

vises. The next major issue is the actual clevises. On a standard Cowgirl, the clevises spin on top of a bead — great for casting, but for trolling you need a flat washer otherwise they'll wear out and fall off.

Size also matters. When trolling it is imperative to have a larger profile with a ton of flashaboo because you'll be fishing open water or weed edges during warmer water periods. These areas tend to be home to some of the muskies' larger prey such as shad, ciscoes, walleyes, etc., so a larger bait produces best.

The last major issue with most bucktails is their weight. Usually a bucktail is built with 3/8 to 1 ounce of lead on its shaft. When trolling, your bucktail needs a minimum of one ounce of lead and I prefer around 1 1/2 ounces, evenly balanced throughout the bait so that it rides flat in the water. If the weight is in a single piece in the back of the bait, the back hook will ride lower in the water and will snag weeds and timber much more easily. On the flip side, if the blades are even with the hook the vortex they create will help to keep the hooks away from obstructions.

There are few bucktails on the market that meet these considerations, but Musky Mayhem's new Trolling Girl is one of them. It incorporates all of these aspects and should be ready for the public during the 2013 show season.

Once you have selected the right bucktail, you need the right gear. The biggest difference when trolling a bucktail, as opposed to trolling a crankbait, is that a bucktail does not have a lip to get it to dive; rather, its blades provide lift. Therefore you must add weight to the line or leader to get the bucktail down to desired depth. I normally run between six ounces and a full pound of weight while trolling blades, depending on the depth I want my baits to run.

There are two options — add weight to the line or the leader. The easiest is to add weight to the leader by adding a simple snap to its front swivel. This works great as long as there are not a lot of floating weeds because they hang up on the line and slide down to the leader. With the weight present, weeds will seldom slide all the way to the bait, but in most situations large muskies are a little hesitant to eat a bucktail with a huge weed ball four to five feet (my typical trolling leader length) away from the lure.

To solve this problem you need to consider running snap



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weights between eight and 15 feet in front of the bait. This will allow all the floating weeds sliding down your line to be caught by the weight where they'll remain a safe distance from your lure and prevent spooking larger fish. As a general rule, if there are a lot of weeds to contend with, run snap weights like an Off-Shore OR 16 clip with a Cross-Lok snap on your line between eight and 15 feet in front of the lure. If there are very few weeds add a Cross-Lok snap on the front of your trolling leader and apply the weights there.

The last major thing to consider when trolling a bucktail, or any other bait for that matter, is the rod. For trolling you need a soft rod with a lot of built-in flex — it should bend all the way to its base to evenly distribute weight as well as constantly keep tension on a fish. The best I found for this application is the Custom X Trolling Rod.

### Pounders!

Large rubber baits hit the musky scene about a decade ago and the results have been monstrous. Spring, summer and fall, big rubber lures such as the Pounder Bull Dawg by Musky Innovations get big fish to make big mistakes! There are many reasons for the huge success of these lures. First of all, the large profile as well as the enormous water displacement mimics the profile and "feel" of a larger baitfish. In addition, their versatility makes them a good year-round choice. Lastly, the ability for them to be fished with a simple pull-pause retrieve, giving them an

irresistible dive-and-rise motion, make them a big fish magnet.

You know the old saying, "To catch a big fish use a big bait." It seems easy enough but casting baits like a Pounder requires a lot of gearing up. The first problem is obvious — the lure weighs a pound, hence the name! This requires vastly different gear than you would use to cast any of the other baits in your tackle box. The next major issue is a big musky's ability to bury its teeth into the plastic. Once the fish bite, their extreme jaw pressure prevents a great hookset.

In order to deal with these issues you need a very specific set-up, such as special rods, specific lines, leaders and reels. First and foremost is the rod, which must be stiff, like the proverbial "broom stick" stiff. A rod I really like for Pounders is Musky Innovations' Monster Magnum rod, which has a very long butt end which is critical for casting such a big bait all day long with a minimum of strain on the angler. Another that I like is St. Croix's XXXH 7-foot-9 Premier which has more than enough strength to cast the bait while hooksets are tremendous due to its extreme stiffness. The one drawback of this rod is its shorter butt end which will make casting the lures a bit more difficult. My favorite rod for Pounders is the Mark Lijewski 4XXXX 8-foot-2 Rod by Trophy Technologies, the same makers as the Musky Innovations Bull Dawg Rod. This rod not only has the stiffness, but also has the long butt end to make for great casting and wonderful hooksets.

A reel for casting giant plastic must

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itself contain little plastic — the added pressure of an extremely heavy bait works wonders at breaking reels. For that reason I prefer higher-end reels like the Shimano Calcutta TE or the new Shimano Tranx PG (low speed). They may be a bit more expensive at first but they'll hold up much longer than lesser-priced reels.

Your reel's drag should be set either super-tight or completely locked down. I prefer to keep my drags locked down and free-spool a musky once it is hooked. (The art of free-spooling involves pressing your reel's thumbbar and controlling line with your thumb when a fish wants line. Conversely, when the fish is not running, engage the spool and reel up line. It is not the easiest thing to learn; however, it works great when perfected.)

I feel it is crucial to perform two solid hooksets on any musky that eats a big rubber bait. Often the first hookset will break the jaw pressure of the fish but not drive the hooks home. A second hookset gets the job done.

As you can imagine, when you keep your drag very tight and cast a bait that weighs a pound, you need some beefy terminal tackle. I prefer to use 100-pound test braided line because backlashes will break the more traditional 80-pound test. I tie my leaders with two No. 6 ball bearing swivels and connect them to the bait with a split ring.

Every year big muskies are caught in all different ways on a variety of diverse lures. However, when you look closely, these two different techniques have been producing some of the biggest numbers of large fish out there. By properly gearing up you are assured of getting in on some of the monster musky action that they produce.

For more about Contributing Writer, Captain Spencer Berman, visit [www.spencersanglingadv.com](http://www.spencersanglingadv.com)



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